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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is concerned with the interaction of leadership-learning style preferences, instructional styles, and group dynamics principles involved in classroom communication. The importance of teachers tempering their leadership style and instructional models to facilitate efficient learning for students of different learning styles is emphasized. Theories of human behavior are outlined, pointing out wide differences between attitudes and motivations in the learning process. An understanding of these theories on the part of the teacher will develop the ability to match teaching and learning styles to achieve more effective teaching. (JD)

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IMPROVING CLASSROOM COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH ACCURATE PERCEPTIONS

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IMPROVING CLASSROOM COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH ACCURATE PERCEPTIONS

In today's complex society which places enormous demands on its citizens there is an urgent need for improved communications between individuals. Schools are among the institutions established by society to teach communication skills. The focus of this paper is concerned with the interaction of leadership-learning style preferences, instructional styles and group dynamics principles involved in classroom communication. Teachers are often unconscious of their leadership style. Students, however, do perceive and evaluate varying teacher leadership styles. Therefore it is imperative that teachers be attuned to their leadership style and to instructional models that tend to facilitate more efficient learning for students of differing learning styles. Instructional materials and procedures can be identified and used to teach learners how to be more specific in their perceptions and communications.

Leadership and Learning Styles

A brief review of various leadership theories will be helpful for a better understanding of the instructional and group dynamics models that will be discussed. The following three theories of Fiedler, McGregor, and Harvey will illustrate the potential impact of leadership style upon effective communication. Fiedler (1974) discusses the impact of an individual's goal orientation upon the effectiveness of his communications to a subordinate or learner. Therefore a person should be aware of his preferred leadership style and its effects upon those individuals who will receive the message. For example, the "task oriented" leader should modify his behavior to correspond with the learning style of those involved whether it is "task oriented" or "people oriented".

McGregor in The Human Side of Enterprise describes another theory of leadership style, designed to explain the variables affecting communications. The author states that human behavior is based on theory--we do A because we theorize it will produce B. It is important that the teacher examine his assumptions about what influences behavior. One's assumptions reflect one's value system and influences one's communication procedures.

It may be useful to check our own assumptions against the following sets of assumptions identified by McGregor as Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X is based upon three assumptions of human behavior. The first 1) assumes that the average human being has an inherent dislike of work and will avoid it if he can. The second 2) assumes that because of the human characteristic of dislike of work, most people must be coerced, controlled, directed, or threatened with punishment to get them to put forth adequate effort toward the achievement of organizational objectives. The final assumption 3) is that the average human being prefers to be directed, wishes to avoid responsibility, has relatively little ambition, and wants security above all.

The assumptions underlying Theory Y are more positive and include 1) that one's commitment to objectives is related to the rewards associated with their achievement, 2) that the average human being learns to seek and to accept responsibility in a favorable environment, 3) that the capacity to exercise a relatively high degree of imagination, ingenuity, and creativity in the solution of organizational or group objectives is widely, not narrowly, distributed in the population, 4) that the expenditure of physical and mental effort in work is as natural as play or rest, 5) that external control and the threat of punishment are not the only

means for bringing about effort toward organizational objectives (man will exercise self-direction and self-control in the service of objectives to which he is committed), and 6) that under the conditions of modern industrial life, the intellectual potentialities of the average human being are only partially utilized.

Adherence to either Theory X or Theory Y would influence how one organizes for decision making and action. If one accepts Theory X, then one would favor 1) one-way communication, teacher toward student, 2) strategy planning by the teacher only, 3) decision making by the teacher only, 4) a handing down of decisions to be implemented by the students, and 5) a handing down of instructions to be carried out by the students.

On the other hand, if one accepts the assumptions of Theory Y, one would probably encourage two-way communication between teacher-student or leader-follower, and student involvement in goal setting, planning, and decision making.

The need is not so much to choose which theory is "right" but to recognize our assumptions about human behavior. The more explicit our assumptions the easier it is to check the degree of how well our behavior reflects our assumptions. Theory Y is more dynamic than X, more optimistic about the possibility for human growth and development, more concerned with self-direction and self-responsibility, more consistent with available social science knowledge. Theory X is very similar to the TYPE I Personality Belief System identified by O. J. Harvey, whereas Theory Y is compatible with TYPE IV leadership qualities.

An Instructional Style

Another model for improving perceptions and communications is designed to help teachers to facilitate students' acquisition of cognitive knowledge and skills. (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1977). This model based on Gagne's types of intellectual skills is most helpful in selecting and organizing the instructional materials to be delivered in a sequential manner.

An instructional leader using this model will ascertain the terminal cognitive skills and knowledge. This information will allow him to identify prerequisite concepts and skills essential to achieving the terminal objectives. This procedure provides the instructor with an advanced organizer, which facilitates the selection and sequencing of instructional media, in addition to the types of questions which will elect the desired level of complexity of intellectual skills (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1977).

Group Dynamics

Since a working knowledge of group dynamics is necessary to improve communications in either cognitive or affective domains, it is essential for group participants to be able to identify and understand the important roles involved in the group decision process. This knowledge promotes keener perceptions and greater objectivity in group decision making.

Groups will function more effectively if the following roles are evident: 1) a leader who coordinates and summarizes the ideas arising from the group discussion and may offer new directions for the group's efforts, 2) a facilitator--one who seeks information from the group and encourages active member participation and may at times relieve the group of tensions, and 3) an inhibitor--one who offers relevant data prior to

the final group decision, in order to deter premature closure on an idea and to assure that alternatives have been considered. Fleffer and Jones provide several simulation activities for various age groups that enhance the understanding of group dynamics and leadership styles.

The classroom leader charged with responsibility for facilitating learning will be more effective by utilizing knowledge of various leadership styles, learning style preferences, instructional approaches, and group dynamics principles.

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